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Sell Metaphors In American Political News Discourse

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Abstract

This paper addresses *sell* metaphors in American news discourse in the 1990s and 2000s. The aim was to study with corpus analytic methods if metaphorical selling is characteristic of political news and if there are discourse topics that enhance the use of *sell* metaphors. *Sell* metaphors seem to be more frequent when a discourse topic is political, and they are very often used in the context of a president's actions. *Sell* metaphors are most frequent in election news.

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1. Introduction

Metaphors are considered to be powerful indirect communication tools for social values or beliefs in the field of politics: it is generally believed that their complex nature and their assumed power to invoke assimilations and emotions make them efficient. Beer and De Landstheer (2004, 30) state that "the power of metaphor is the power to understand and impose political order". They emphasize that metaphors are important in the struggle to create collective meanings and to reflect the meaning of power (ibid. 7). Metaphor in political discourse has been studied as a thinking model in the frame of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff 1996, Chilton 1996, Charteris-Black 2004). Metaphors have also been a research interest in the field of political communication research (Mio 1997, Howe 1988, Ivie and Ritter 1989, Ivie and Giner 2009), and they have been approached as legitimizing or delegitimizing elements of discourse within Critical Discourse Analysis (Chilton 1996, Chilton 2004).

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Several scholars suggest that the most frequently found source domains for metaphors in political discourse seem to represent an antagonism of some kind: war, sport or competition (Deignan 2005, 27; Kövecses 2005, 174-176; Scheithauer 2007, 80, 84). There are, however, few previous studies on business as a metaphorical source domain in political discourse, although political processes can often be seen as commercial actions, such as *buying*, *selling* or *paying a price*. Moreover, there is little research on the differences of metaphor use in different genres from the quantitative perspective. Previous research has shown that metaphors increase in news discourse during critical periods, such as a war or an election (Vertessen and De Landstheer 2008). There are some studies of political metaphor use in the European context from the quantitative point of view, such as Zinken (2004). Within Critical Discourse Analysis, corpus linguistics has increasingly become a tool of analysis, as exemplified in Baker, Gabrielatos, Khosravinik, Krzyanowski, McEnery and Wodak (2008) or Salama (2011). Regarding *buy* and *sell* metaphors, Handl (2011, 263-265) has suggested that commercial source domains (such as *buy* and *sell*) might be less used because of the negative value inherent in them. This veiled negativity could be the reason they are used in political discourse.

The aim of this study is thus to explore with corpus analytic methods if metaphorical selling is characteristic of political news and if there are discourse topics that particularly seem to enhance *sell* metaphors. To understand further how business and selling structures political discourse and relates to political objectives, I shall also analyze the agents and the targets of *sell* metaphors: who is "selling" and what is being "sold"? The scope of this study is the American presidential politics in the years 1992-2012. The data are comprised of political news and general news in the United States in written and spoken media.

The research questions are as follows:

- Do *sell* metaphors occur in political contexts more than in other contexts?
- Are there political agents who *sell* more than others?
- Are there political topics which are *sold* more often than others?
- Is there a president whose actions are framed as *selling* more than others?

With the last three research questions, the focus of this study is more on the president (or his administration) than on other political agents and agenda in the United States. In the last question, the comparisons are made between Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, who were the incumbent presidents in 1992-2012.

2. Metaphor identification, method of analysis and data

In this study, I will follow a metaphor definition suggested by a group of researchers in the Metaphor Analysis Project and MetNet (2006): "metaphor is a linguistic phenomenon found in discourse which has a potential to be identified as a metaphor". As this definition is very general, it has to be amended with a notion that some incongruity or semantic tension has to be found in this discourse event (Cameron 2003, 9). Cameron also posits that metaphor may be signaled by an incongruous lexical item, but that metaphorical interpretation can also be created in the discourse context or in the larger co-text (ibid.). The incongruity aspect with regard to *sell* means that no element of financial exchange can be found in the discourse event defined as metaphorical.

The data (Table 1) are comprised of four corpora representing American news: a news corpus of presidential elections in 1992-2012 (3.2 million words), a corpus of other political news in the 1990s and 2000s (1.6 million words) and selected parts of the spoken and magazines sections from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (for short: COCA). In total, the word count is ca. 44 million words.

Table 1. The word count in the four subcorpora

Subcorpus	Word count
Election news	4 086 172
Political news	2 297 585
Spoken (COCA)	20 677 437
Magazines (COCA)	21 095 533
All	43 838 271

The publications in the presidential election news corpus and political news corpus are as follows:

American Thinker (online)
Commentary Magazine
Human Events
Mother Jones
National Review
Newsweek
Rolling Stone
Salon (online)
Slate (online)
The American Conservative
The American Prospect
The American Spectator
The Atlantic Monthly
The Harper's Magazine
The Nation
The New Republic
The New York Times editorials
The New Yorker
The Wall Street Journal editorials
The Washington Monthly
The Washington Times
The Weekly Standard
Time
U.S. News and World Report

The data in the election news corpus cover both the primary and the general election period in the presidential elections 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012. The data in the political news corpus are selected from news coverage of national politics in December 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2009. These years were chosen to avoid having election news in this corpus (no national elections in the United States in these years). This same selection of years was applied to COCA: the data are the magazines and spoken sections of COCA from 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2009. The COCA sections represent in this study general American news media, which is compared with the political news in the other two corpora.

The procedure of defining a topic as political was not always easy. To be classified as political, a topic had to be related to government, public policies, legislation or publicly contested social issues. The first three were fairly simple to detect, but publicly contested social issues were sometimes borderline cases. Gender issues (such as feminism), race, abortion, religion or education were defined as political topics if they were discussed as public issues with political ramifications.

3. The results

In this section, I will show how the frequency of *sell* metaphors varies with regard to the topic, the agent and the target in the discourse context. There are 832 *sell* metaphors in the data (Table 2). The occurrence level is 19 per million words in the entire corpus.

Table 2. All *sell* metaphors in the four subcorpora

Subcorpus	N	Frequency
Election news	332	81
Political news	106	46
Spoken (COCA)	304	15
Magazines (COCA)	90	4
All	832	19

In general, the principal metaphorical sense of *sell* in these data is *to try to make something accepted*; another is *tough or hard sell* in the sense of *difficult to get accepted*. Here are four examples of *sell* metaphors from the data:

1. If you're an Iowa Democrat who wakes up in a cold sweat in January worried about nominating someone who may be **a tough sell** in Middle America, the person you probably run to is Edwards, not Obama. (Scheiber 2007)
2. WEBER: **And the way he tried to sell it today**. In his speech today President Bush said we will cut taxes to recover momentum for our economy and to reward effort and enterprise. That's a simple, eloquent statement of what we believe about [sic] economics, and I'm glad it came from the president. You know, they used to say when Ronald Reagan was president, conservatives would say we have a mole in the White House. His name is Ronald Reagan. And I think that's what Kate is saying. I hope that Secretary O'Neill is effective in pushing the tax cut in the Congress, but I think the president [G.W.Bush] **is going to be effective in selling it to the country**. (Capital Gang 2001)
3. The Proposal also employs the antique device of the warring couple obliged to act like lovers. Margaret and Andrew have to meet his parents back home in Alaska and **sell the pretense** that they're happily engaged, leading to many forced smiles and private grimaces. Having created Margaret as a termagant, screenwriter Pete Chiarelli and director Anne Fletcher put her through a film-length rehab of tough love. (Corliss 2009)
4. SCHLESINGER: It was **a tough sell**, convincing jurors that J.D. acted in self-defense when he shot his father, who was 77, sick and sleeping at the time. (Forty-Eight Hours 1993)

The difference between general news and political news is clear as can be seen in (Fig. 1.). *Sell* metaphors seem to be most frequent in election news.

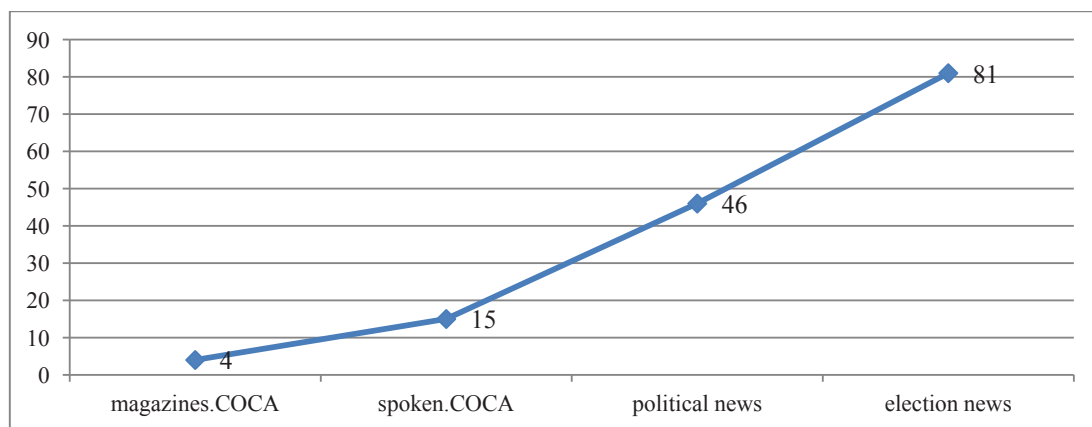


Fig. 1. *Sell* metaphors in the four subcorpora. Standardized frequency x/1 000 000 words.

3.1. *Sell metaphors in a political context*

There are two types of data in this study: political news and general news. It seems that *sell* metaphors are applied more when the discourse topic is political (Table 3). In the election news and political news corpora, there are naturally very few other topics: 97% of occurrences in the election news and 96% of political news are with a political discourse topic. The spoken and magazines data from the *COCA* represented general news in this study, and there are less *sell* metaphors with a political topic in the magazines, 56%. However, a high percentage of *sell* metaphors in the spoken *COCA* data concern political issues (95%). The spoken *COCA* results will be discussed in Sections 3.2 and 4. In total, there are 762 *sell* metaphors with a political discourse topic and 70 with a non-political discourse topic. The other discourse contexts in which *sell* metaphors were found were various, such as media, criminal procedures, entertainment, family, education or religion.

Table 3. The percentage of *sell* metaphors with a political topic

Subcorpus	%	N
Election news	97	321
Political news	96	101
Spoken (<i>COCA</i>)	95	290
Magazines (<i>COCA</i>)	56	50

3.2. Who is selling?

It is not surprising that in the election news presidential candidates are the agents of *selling* in 99% of the cases (N=321). In the political news, 49% of *sell* metaphors concern presidents (N=52). The spoken *COCA* section seems to have a considerable portion of national, presidential news, since 71% of *sell* metaphors concern a President (N=216). In contrast, in *COCA* magazines, a president or his administration is the context of *sell* metaphors in only 16% of the cases (N=14). In total, a president, his administration or a presidential candidate is the agent of metaphorical selling in 72% of occurrences (N=603). The other agents of *sell* metaphors were various, such as politicians, the Congress or media.

Here is an example of President Clinton *selling* his economic plan:

5. BILL CLINTON: And let me say this. We need you to hold our feet to the fire. No raise in taxes unless we cut spending.

ROBERTS: Bill Clinton, **selling his economic plan** and sounding all the right notes, but there's something off-key.

Sen. PETE DOMENICI, (R), New Mexico: This is not a deficit-reduction [sic] package by cutting spending, this is a dramatic and huge tax increase. (Nightline 1993)

3.3. Which president is selling?

With regard to the three presidents as agents of *selling*, only three corpora were used as data for this analysis (political news, spoken *COCA* and magazines *COCA*). There are 284 *sell* metaphors related to presidents in these data. It is worth noting that concerning the administrations of Clinton and George W. Bush, the data are comprised of two years of each administration (1993 and 1997 for Clinton, 2001 and 2005 for Bush), but there are only one year of data of the Obama administration (2009).

There were no significant differences between the three presidents: all presidents "sell" their agenda. In the 1993 data, there were more *sell* metaphors used of President Clinton than of the two other presidents in any year. In 1997, though, there were very few *sell* metaphors related to Clinton. It also seems that every president *sells* his 'signature' legislation: the major domestic or foreign agenda of his administration. In these data, Clinton and Obama *sold* economic recovery and health care reforms, Bush the Iraq War and a Social Security reform.

Here is an example of President Obama *selling* his health care reform:

6. If health care reform passes, that might be nice. But for those voters who won't get coverage because of it, the direct benefit will be hard to grasp. **That's why the White House and Democratic strategists are gearing up for a concerted effort to sell the benefits of health**

care reform after it passes. This will include arguments for what's in the bill—and the argument that improvements will be made between the bill's passage and implementation in 2014. (Dickerson 2009)

3.4. *What does a president sell?*

In this analysis, only the same three corpora as in Section 3.3. are used as data. The question is: are there any differences in the issues that are *sold* by presidents? The topics addressed with *sell* metaphors were classified as follows: economy, health care, foreign policy, Social Security, taxes, multiple policies or agenda in general and polls or campaigning. In addition, there was a class "other". There are no great differences in the issues *sold* by the presidents. Economy (24%), health care (17%) and foreign policy (16%) are the political issues most often addressed with *sell* metaphors (Table 4).

Table 4. The target of the *sell* metaphors

What is <i>sold</i> ?	%	N
Economy	24	68
Health care	17	48
Foreign policy	16	45
Social Security	10	27
Taxes	8	24
Agenda, multiple policies	7	20
Polls, campaign	7	21
Other	11	31
All	100	284

Here is a typical example of the Bush White House *selling* the Iraq war:

7. Because what matters is not what's on television but the ghostly afterimage that lingers in our minds and clouds our vision after we turn off the television. It's all too easy to envision a time when, **the White House will no longer feel compelled to sell a projected war to the American people but can merely pitch it to Jerry Bruckheimer**, whose new series will show us why we need to spread our influence—preferably by force, since diplomacy is less apt to translate into compelling TV-throughout the Middle East. (Prose 2004)

4. Conclusion

There are three major results in this study: first, *sell* metaphors seem to occur most often in political contexts; second, they are especially frequent in election news; and third, they are very often used in the context of presidential politics in the United States. In the elections, the competition element in elections and the conceptualization of voters as consumers may enhance the use of *sell* metaphors. The constitutional powers of the president in the United States are great. Thus, his position as a communicator of his agenda can be seen as *selling*.

There are, however, two interesting minor results. There seems to be very few differences between the three presidents from two different parties: all presidents "sell" or their agenda is a "tough sell". Moreover, there are no political issues which would be framed as *selling* more often than others, except those issues that are dominant in the president's agenda, such as health care for president Obama, for instance.

There are some reservations to these results. First, the structure of the spoken *COCA* corpus seems to be somewhat biased: the presidential politics as a news topic is very dominant in this part of the *COCA*. Second, there is always some ambivalence in the metaphor identification. Third, it was not always very clear if a news topic was political or not. Finally, the selection of years 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2009 may have led to some randomness with regard to news topics. The selection of the month December for data in the political news corpus may also affect the results in a similar way.

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